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AUTHOR Herrenkohl, Roy C.; Herrenkohl, Ellen C.
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the hypothesis that the lack of parental approval of the child characterizes child-abusing families. As part of a larger study of the coping styles of such families, a variety of verbal and non-verbal behaviors in parent-child interactions was examined. Subjects were 80 mother-child pairs from among four groups of comparable SES: (1) families served by a child welfare agency, formally charged with child abuse; (2) families served by a child welfare agency but not charged with abuse; (3) families served by Head Start but not by a child welfare agency; and (4) families served by a day care program but not by a child welfare agency. The interactions involved four types of activities: puzzles, play-doh, felt board, and story-reading. In addition to the interaction observations, several other assessment procedures were used in the study. Mothers were interviewed, and children were administered the McCarthy Scale of Mental Abilities and observed in their preschool classrooms. Results of multiple regression analyses, with income and age of child controlled (average age 52 months), showed that abuse group mothers manifested less approval behavior than control group mothers. Examination of zero-order correlations indicated that lower amounts of approval behavior were related to the mother's child-care responsibilities, observed parental detachment, number of mother-child separations, and the child's cognitive ability. (Author/MP)

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DEFICIENCY OF MATERNAL APPROVAL IN THE ABUSIVE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT*

Roy C. Herrenkohl and Ellen C. Herrenkohl
Lehigh University

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Introduction

Recently, considerable attention has been given families in which child abuse occurs. The abusive situation involves the parent who cannot or does not protect the child from abuse, as well as the perpetrator of the abuse. The drama associated with the abusive episode can obscure the less dramatic, but possibly more important, day-to-day quality of the family environment in which the abused child resides. In such families, the periodic violence toward a child is a dramatic indication of a distorted parent-child relationship.

The family environment has long been considered crucial to a child's normal development. Werner et al. (1971) in their study of a large group of children on Kauai in Hawaii demonstrated that the quality of the family environment was a major determinant of a child's physical, intellectual, and emotional status by the time the child was ten. Martin (1976) has documented the negative developmental consequences for the child of not only the trauma of abuse, but also of the non-nurturant interpersonal environment. Elmer (1977) has demonstrated that the consequences of abuse derive from a combination of abusive treatment and a non-nurturant, chaotic, and emotionally damaging family environment. A recent study (Burgess and Conger, 1977) has suggested that in addition to the presence in the parent-

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child relationship in abusive families of the negative qualities associated with harsh treatment, there is a lack of positive qualities such as praise and encouragement, which are needed for the optimal development of the child.

Our assumption is that the deprivation of nurturance may be less dramatic than the abusive act, but equally or even more devastating to the child from the standpoint of developing social competence (Zigler, 1978). In the present report, parental approval of the child's behavior is defined as a nurturant quality which it is hypothesized differentiates abusive from non-abusive families in the extent to which it is present.

The appropriate focus for examining the presence or absence of positive qualities is the child's day-to-day experience of the family environment, particularly his/her relationship to his/her parents.

Method

As part of a larger study of the coping styles of child-abusing families, a variety of verbal and non-verbal behaviors in parent-child interactions was examined. The interactions were observed in the homes of the participating families by two observers, one for each party to the interaction. The interactions involved four types of activities - puzzles, play-doh, felt board, and story-reading. Non-verbal observations were made in 10-second intervals over a total of five minutes for each task. Verbal responses were tape-recorded for later analysis.

The results which follow are based on an analysis of eighty mother-child interactions taken equally from four groups: (a) families served by a child welfare agency, formally charged with child abuse; (b) families

served by a child welfare agency but not charged with abuse, (c) families served by Head Start but not by a child welfare agency; and (d) families served by a day care program but not by a child welfare agency. These groups were chosen for their relatively comparable socio-economic status (although the day care families were found to have a higher income level than the other three groups). The children's average age was 52 months (standard deviation 10.4 months).

In addition to the interaction observations, several other assessment procedures were used in the study. Mothers were interviewed, and children were administered the McCarthy Scale of Mental Abilities and observed in preschool classrooms.

Table 1 lists the categories of behavior examined in the interaction. Approval behavior, which is the focus here, is defined as any verbal statement of agreeing with or praising the statement or action of the other person. Interobserver reliability of interaction behaviors was found to average .82.

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TABLE 1

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Results

The hypothesis concerned the relationship between participant groups and approval of the child by the parent. Mothers in abusive families were expected to be less nurturant than mothers in non-abusive families. Table 2 gives the results of a multiple regression analysis, comparing the four ("dummy" coded) participant groups (cf. Cohen and Cohen, 1975). Each group

TABLE 1: CATEGORIES USED IN THE INTERACTION, FOR BOTH PARENT AND CHILD ANALYSIS

Non-Verbal	Verbal
Aggression toward self	Speaking
Aggression toward things	Positive self-image
Mutual look	Seek direction
Look at face of other	Negative self-image
Look away	Approval (verbal)
Point--show	Coax
Help	Explain discipline
Repeated help	Correct--disagree
Work	Direct
Hinder	Warn--threaten
Pleasure	Criticize
Agree (non-verbal)	Reject
Disagree (non-verbal)	
Distress	
Anger	
Affection	
Avoid	
Aversive	

was significantly different from the day care group, the comparison group. The protective service group accounted for the most variance on observed approval. In each instance, the relationship is such that not being in the day care group is associated with less approval behavior.

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TABLE 2

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Based on zero-order correlations, it was found that level of income was significantly related to the amount of approval ($r = .29$). While the age of the child did not significantly relate to amount of approval ($r = .03$), income and age were included in a multiple regression before entering the group variables. Table 3 indicates the multiple regression results. With this adjustment made, the abuse group accounts for the largest increment in R^2; protective service is next. None of the remaining variables, that is, being in the Head Start group, family income, or child's age, is significantly related to observed approval.

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TABLE 3

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Discussion

The results indicate that there is a difference between families in this important aspect of a parent-child relationship. At least in the mother-child pairs studied, there is less parental approval behavior in the abuse group than in the comparison groups.

TABLE 2: MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF PARTICIPANT GROUPS ON PARENTAL APPROVAL

	F	P	R^2	Direction
Abuse	10.50	.002	.01	-
Protective Service	12.60	.001	.06	-
Head Start	5.40	.02	.00	-

TABLE 3: MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF PARTICIPANT GROUPS ON PARENTAL APPROVAL

	F	P	R^2	Direction
Income	2.75	.10	.01	+
Age	1.03	.31	.01	+
Abuse	8.16	.006	.04	-
Protective Service	10.44	.002	.02	-
Head Start	3.45	.106	.00	-

Several questions concerning the broader meaning of differences in approval behavior are raised by these results. First, what is the relationship between approval behavior and other parental interaction behaviors? Second, what other aspects of the family social environment are associated with differences in approval behavior? Third, do characteristics of the child relate to parental approval? Finally, do aspects of the child's functioning relate to the parent's approval behavior?

Parental Approval Behavior and Other Interaction Behaviors

Table 4 gives the zero-order correlations between the frequency of approval behaviors and other observed parental behaviors. These data suggest that a high degree of approval is associated with several behaviors supportive of the child's performance. These are looking at the child, helping, non-verbal agreeing, seeking direction, coaxing, correcting, and directing. While most of these correlations are in the 30's and 40's, a few are in the 60's and 70's (e.g., speaking and seeking direction).

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TABLE 4

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It is notable that the more negative parental behaviors such as hindering, anger, aversive behaviors, criticizing, and rejecting are not strongly related to approval behavior. In other words, the presence of negative interaction behaviors does not predict the absence of positive behaviors.

Approval Behavior and Features of the Family Environment

Table 5 indicates the relationship between the amount of observed parental approval behavior and selected features of the family. The more siblings a child has, the less approval behavior. The more income a family has, the more approval. The more distraction in the home environment (as

TABLE 4: ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PARENTAL APPROVAL AND OTHER INTERACTION CATEGORIES

4a. Non-Verbal	Approval
Mutual look	.34**
Look at face of other	.38**
Look away	-.40**
Point - show	.32**
Help	.38**
Repeated help	.31**
Work	.08
Hinder	-.15
Pleasure	.11
Agree (non-verbal)	.35**
Disagree (non-verbal)	.00
Distress	-.09
Anger	-.06
Affection	.20
Avoid	.17
Aversive	-.10

4b. Verbal	
Speaking	.71**
Positive self-image	.15
Negative self-image	.16
Seek direction	.68**
Coax	.37**
Correct - disagree	.44**
Direct	.34**
Warn - threaten	-.01
Criticize	-.16
Reject	-.03

*$p \leq .05$
**$p \leq .01$

rated by the interaction observers), the less parental approval. This suggests that where there are more demands on the parent and fewer resources, the amount of approval behavior is reduced.

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TABLE 5

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Table 6 indicates the relationship between characteristics of the parents and amount of observed parental approval. The greater the degree of parental detachment (as rated by the interaction observer), the less approval behavior there is. Harsh punishment of the parent by her own parents (as reported by the parent) was not found to be related to parental approval.

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TABLE 6

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Characteristics of the Child and Approval Behavior

Table 7 indicates the relationship between selected characteristics of the child and approval behaviors. Several relationships are statistically significant. The earlier the child's birth order, the more approval. This finding accords with the negative relationship found between number of siblings and approval reported above, which suggests that as families grow larger, the resources for providing nurturance to each subsequent child become strained. A recently reported finding by Gelles (1978) indicates a curvilinear relationship between family violence and number of children, such that families with few children or with many children are least abusive, while families with an intermediate number (4-5-6) are more violent. The explanation advanced by Gelles is that parents with fewer

TABLE 5: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMOUNT OF OBSERVED PARENTAL APPROVAL BEHAVIOR AND FEATURES OF THE FAMILY

Variable	Correlation	Measure
Number of siblings	-.26**	Interview
Family income	.29**	Interview
Number of stresses	-.10	Interview
Amount of distraction	-.35**	Observer rating

TABLE 6: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMOUNT OF OBSERVED PARENTAL APPROVAL BEHAVIOR AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT

Variable	Correlation	Measure
Parental detachment	-.47 **	Observer rating
Harsh punishment of parent	-.05	Interview

**$p \leq .01$

children experience fewer demands. As the number of children increases, the demands and the abuse increase. However, in very large families where there are older children to help, the demands and the abuse again decrease. The "larger" families in the present study were comparable in size to Gelles' "intermediate range" of 4 to 6 children.

The amount of prior separation of child from mother is also related (-.25) to approval behavior. The more approval, the less separation. As suggested by Klaus and Kennell (1976), the present result suggests that a possible element underlying reduced approval may be a weak "bond" between mother and child. They suggest that parent-infant bonding is negatively influenced by separation between mother and child in the first days of life, and is reflected subsequently in decreased verbalization of mother toward child.

The Relationship Between the Child's Functioning and Approval Behavior

Examination of the relationship between the child's cognitive score and approval behavior (Table 7) indicates the more approval, the higher the score ($r = .35$, $p < .01$). This finding does not indicate whether bright children elicit more praise because of their successful task-related behaviors, or whether parental praise produces better cognitive skills and test-taking behavior among children. Probably both possibilities are involved. Insofar as cognitive ability is also related to social competence, as has been proposed by Zigler (1973), the impact of approval behavior and other nurturant behaviors may be very important for broad aspects of the child's development.

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TABLE 7

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TABLE 7: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMOUNT OF APPROVAL BEHAVIOR AND FACTORS RELATED TO CHILD

Variable	Correlation	Source of Information
Birth order	-.22*	Interview
Child's age	.03	Interview
Number of child difficulties	.03	Hosp. Record/Interview
Child's detachment	-.18	Observer rating
Separations	-.24**	Interview
Cognitive score	.35**	McCarthy Scales

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

The relationships considered here can be viewed as pieces of a puzzle. Whether the pieces are key pieces and fit together in the way we are suggesting can be determined only by further efforts to solve the puzzle.

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